



## THE JOURNEY OF ENGLISH LITERATURE FROM EARLIEST TO MODERN TIMES

**DR. CHHABI**

Ph.D. (English),  
University Department of English,  
TMBU, Bhagalpur  
(BH) INDIA

### ABSTRACT

*English is a West Germanic language that originated from Anglo-Frisian dialects brought to Britain in the mid 5th to 7th centuries AD by Anglo-Saxon settlers from what is now northwest Germany, west Denmark and the Netherlands, displacing the Celtic languages that previously predominated. English is the third most commonly spoken language in the world today with upwards of 360 million first language speakers, a further 375 million for whom English is a second language and many non-native speakers worldwide. The English literature has developed over the course of more than 1,400 years. The history of the English language has traditionally been divided into three main periods: Old English (450-1100 AD), Middle English (1100-circa 1500 AD) and Modern English which began in the late 15th century with the introduction of the printing press to London and the King James Bible as well as the Great Vowel Shift. This article is focused on historical development of English-language literature rather than the literature of England, so that it includes writers from Scotland, Wales, and the whole of Ireland, as well as literature in English from countries of the former British Empire, including the United States. However, until the early 19th century, it only deals with the literature of the United Kingdom and Ireland.*

**Key Words:** English, Language, Literature, History, Development, Journey.

### INTRODUCTION

English Literature is one of richest literatures of the world. Being the literature of a great nation which, though inhabiting a small island off the west coast of Europe, has made its mark in the world on account of her spirit of adventure, perseverance and tenacity, it reflects

**DR. CHHABI**

1Page



these characteristics of a great people. It has vitality, rich variety and continuity. As literature is the reflection of society, the various changes which have come about in English society, from the earliest to the modern time, have left their stamp on English literature. Thus in order to appreciate properly the various phases of English literature, knowledge of English Social and Political History is essential. For example, we cannot form a just estimate of Chaucer without taking into account the characteristics of the period in which he was living, or of Shakespeare without taking proper notice of the great events which were taking place during the reign of Elizabeth. The same is the case with other great figures and important movements in English literature. When we study the journey of English literature from the earliest to modern times, we find that it has passed through certain definite phases, each having marked characteristics. These phases may be termed as 'Ages' or 'Periods', which are named after the central literary figures or the important rulers of England. Thus we have the 'Ages' of Chaucer, Shakespeare, Milton, Dryden, Pope, Johnson, Wordsworth, Tennyson, Hardy; and, on the other hand, the Elizabethan Age, the Jacobean Period, the Age of Queen Anne, the Victorian Age, the Georgian Period. Some of these phases are named after certain literary movements, as the Classical Age, the Romantic Age; while others after certain important historical eras, as the Medieval Period, Anglo-Saxon Period, Anglo-Norman Period. These literary phases are also named by some literary historians after the centuries, as the Seventeenth Century Literature, Eighteenth Century Literature, Nineteenth-Century Literature and Twentieth Century Literature. These 'Ages' and 'Periods' naturally overlap each other, and they are not to be followed strictly, but it is essential to keep them in mind in order to follow the growth of English literature, and its salient and distinctive characteristics during the various periods of its development.

### **Old English:**

English, as we know it, descends from the language spoken by the north Germanic tribes who settled in England from the 5th century A.D. onwards. They had no writing (except runes, used as charms) until they learned the Latin alphabet from Roman missionaries. The earliest written works in Old English (as their language is now known to scholars) were probably composed orally at first, and may have been passed on from speaker to speaker before being written. We know the names of some of the later writers (Cædmon, Ælfric and King Alfred) but most writing is anonymous. Old English literature is mostly chronicle and poetry - lyric, descriptive but chiefly narrative or epic. By the time literacy becomes widespread, Old English is effectively a foreign and dead language. And its forms do not significantly affect subsequent developments in English literature. (With the scholarly exception of the 19th century poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins, who finds in Old English verse the model for his metrical system of "sprung rhythm".)

### **Middle English and Chaucer:**

**DR. CHHABI**

2P a g e



From 1066 onwards, the language is known to scholars as Middle English. Ideas and themes from French and Celtic literature appear in English writing at about this time, but the first great name in English literature is that of Geoffrey Chaucer (1343-1400). Chaucer introduces the iambic pentameter line, the rhyming couplet and other rhymes used in Italian poetry (a language in which rhyming is arguably much easier than in English, thanks to the frequency of terminal vowels). Some of Chaucer's work is prose and some is lyric poetry, but his greatest work is mostly narrative poetry, which we find in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Canterbury Tales*. Other notable mediaeval works are the anonymous *Pearl* and *Gawain and the Green Knight* (probably by the same author) and William Langlands' *Piers Plowman*.

### **Tudor Lyric Poetry:**

Modern lyric poetry in English begins in the early 16th century with the work of Sir Thomas Wyatt (1503-1542) and Henry Howard, Earl of Surrey (1517-1547). Wyatt, who is greatly influenced by the Italian, Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch) introduces the sonnet and a range of short lyrics to English, while Surrey (as he is known) develops unrhymed pentameters (or blank verse) thus inventing the verse form which will be of great use to contemporary dramatists. A flowering of lyric poetry in the reign of Elizabeth comes with such writers as Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586), Edmund Spenser (1552-1599), Sir Walter Raleigh (1552-1618), Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) and William Shakespeare (1564-1616). The major works of the time are Spenser's *Faerie Queen*, Sidney's *Astrophil and Stella* and Shakespeare's sonnets.

### **Renaissance Drama:**

The first great English dramatist is Marlowe. Before the 16th century English drama meant the amateur performances of Bible stories by craft guilds on public holidays. Marlowe's plays use the five act structure and the medium of blank verse, which Shakespeare finds so productive. Shakespeare develops and virtually exhausts this form, his Jacobean successors producing work which is rarely performed today, though some pieces have literary merit, notably *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil* by John Webster (1580-1625) and *The Revenger's Tragedy* by Cyril Tourneur (1575-1626). The excessive and gratuitous violence of Jacobean plays leads to the clamor for closing down the theatres, which is enacted by parliament after the Civil war.

### **Metaphysical Poetry:**

The greatest of Elizabethan lyric poets is John Donne (1572-1631), whose short love poems are characterized by wit and irony, as he seeks to wrest meaning from experience. The

**DR. CHHABI**

3Page



preoccupation with the big questions of love, death and religious faith marks out Donne and his successors who are often called metaphysical poets. (This name, coined by Dr. Samuel Johnson in an essay of 1779, was revived and popularized by T.S. Eliot, in an essay of 1921. It can be unhelpful to modern students who are unfamiliar with this adjective, and who are led to think that these poets belonged to some kind of school or group - which is not the case.) After his wife's death, Donne underwent a serious religious conversion, and wrote much fine devotional verse. The best known of the other metaphysical are George Herbert (1593-1633), Andrew Marvell (1621-1678) and Henry Vaughan (1621-1695).

### **Epic Poetry:**

Long narrative poems on heroic subjects mark the best work of classical Greek (Homer's Iliad and Odyssey) and Roman (Virgil's *Aeneid*) poetry. John Milton (1608-1674) who was Cromwell's secretary, set out to write a great biblical epic, unsure whether to write in Latin or English, but settling for the latter in *Paradise Lost*. John Dryden (1631-1700) also wrote epic poetry, on classical and biblical subjects. Though Dryden's work is little read today it leads to a comic parody of the epic form, or mock-heroic. The best poetry of the mid 18th century is the comic writing of Alexander Pope (1688-1744). Pope is the best-regarded comic writer and satirist of English poetry. Among his many masterpieces, one of the more accessible is *The Rape of the Lock* (seekers of sensation should note that "rape" here has its archaic sense of "removal by force"; the "lock" is a curl of the heroine's hair). Serious poetry of the period is well represented by the neo-classical Thomas Gray (1716-1771) whose *Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard* virtually perfects the elegant style favored at the time.

### **Restoration Comedy:**

On the death of Oliver Cromwell (in 1658) plays were no longer prohibited. A new kind of comic drama, dealing with issues of sexual politics among the wealthy and the bourgeois, arose. This is Restoration Comedy, and the style developed well beyond the restoration period into the mid 18th century almost. The total number of plays performed is vast, and many lack real merit, but the best drama uses the restoration conventions for a serious examination of contemporary morality. A play which exemplifies this well is *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley (1640-1716).

### **Prose Fiction and the Novel:**

Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), wrote satires in verse and prose. He is best-known for the extended prose work *Gulliver's Travels*, in which a fantastic account of a series of travels is the vehicle for satirizing familiar English institutions, such as religion, politics and law. Another writer who uses prose fiction, this time much more naturalistic, to explore other



questions of politics or economics is Daniel Defoe (1661-1731), author of Robinson Crusoe and Moll Flanders. The first English novel is generally accepted to be Pamela (1740), by Samuel Richardson (1689-1761): this novel takes the form of a series of letters; Pamela, a virtuous housemaid resists the advances of her rich employer, who eventually marries her. Richardson's work was almost at once satirized by Henry Fielding (1707-1754) in Joseph Andrews (Joseph is depicted as the brother of Richardson's Pamela Andrews) and Tom Jones. After Fielding, the novel is dominated by the two great figures of Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Jane Austen (1775-1817), who typify, respectively, the new regional, historical romanticism and the established, urbane classical views. Novels depicting extreme behaviour, madness or cruelty, often in historically remote or exotic settings are called Gothic.

### **The Rise of Romanticism:**

A movement in philosophy but especially in literature, romanticism is the revolt of the senses or passions against the intellect and of the individual against the consensus. Its first stirrings may be seen in the work of William Blake (1757-1827), and in continental writers such as the Swiss philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the German playwrights Johann Christoph Friedrich Schiller and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe. The publication, in 1798, by the poets William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834) of a volume entitled Lyrical Ballads is a significant event in English literary history, though the poems were poorly received and few books sold. The elegant latinisms of Gray are dropped in favour of a kind of English closer to that spoken by real people (supposedly). Actually, the attempts to render the speech of ordinary people are not wholly convincing. Robert Burns (1759-1796) writes lyric verse in the dialect of lowland Scots (a variety of English). After Shakespeare, Burns is perhaps the most often quoted of writers in English: we sing his Auld Lang Syne every New Year's Eve.

### **Later Romanticism:**

The work of the later romantics John Keats (1795-1821) and his friend Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822; husband of Mary Shelley) is marked by an attempt to make language beautiful, and by an interest in remote history and exotic places. George Gordon, Lord Byron (1788-1824) uses romantic themes, sometimes comically, to explain contemporary events. Romanticism begins as a revolt against established views, but eventually becomes the established outlook. Wordsworth becomes a kind of national monument, while the Victorians make what was at first revolutionary seem familiar, domestic and sentimental.

### **Victorian Poetry:**



The major poets of the Victorian era are Alfred, Lord Tennyson (1809-1892) and Robert Browning (1812-1889). Both are prolific and varied, and their work defies easy classification. Tennyson makes extensive use of classical myth and Arthurian legend, and has been praised for the beautiful and musical qualities of his writing. Browning's chief interest is in people; he uses blank verse in writing dramatic monologues in which the speaker achieves a kind of self-portraiture: his subjects are both historical individuals and representative types or caricatures (Mr. Sludge the Medium). Other Victorian poets of note include Browning's wife, Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1806-1861) and Christina Rossetti (1830-1894). Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889) is notable for his use of what he calls "sprung rhythm"; as in Old English verse syllables are not counted, but there is a pattern of stresses. Hopkins' work was not well-known until very long after his death.

### **The Rise of the Popular Novel:**

In the 19th century, adult literacy increases markedly: attempts to provide education by the state, and self-help schemes are partly the cause and partly the result of the popularity of the novel. Publication in installments means that works are affordable for people of modest means. The change in the reading public is reflected in a change in the subjects of novels: the high bourgeois world of Austen gives way to an interest in characters of humble origins. The great novelists write works which in some ways transcend their own period, but which in detail very much explore the preoccupations of their time.

### **Dickens and the Brontës:**

Certainly the greatest English novelist of the 19th century, and possibly of all time, is Charles Dickens (1812-1870). The complexity of his best work, the variety of tone, the use of irony and caricature create surface problems for the modern reader, who may not readily persist in reading. But *Great Expectations*, *Bleak House*, *Our Mutual Friend* and *Little Dorrit* are works with which every student should be acquainted. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) and her sisters Emily (1818-1848) and Anne (1820-1849) are understandably linked together, but their work differs greatly. Charlotte is notable for several good novels, among which her masterpiece is *Jane Eyre*, in which we see the heroine, after much adversity, achieve happiness on her own terms. Emily Brontë's *Wüthering Heights* is a strange work, which enjoys almost cult status. Its concerns are more romantic, less contemporary than those of *Jane Eyre* - but its themes of obsessive love and self-destructive passion have proved popular with the 20th century reader.

### **The Beginnings of American Literature:**

The early 19th century sees the emergence of American literature, with the stories of Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849), the novels of Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-64), Herman Melville



(1819-91), and Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens; 1835-1910), and the poetry of Walt Whitman (1819-92) and Emily Dickinson (1830-86). Notable works include Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* and Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*.

### Later Victorian novelists:

After the middle of the century, the novel, as a form, becomes firmly-established: sensational or melodramatic "popular" writing is represented by Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), but the best novelists achieved serious critical acclaim while reaching a wide public, notable authors being Anthony Trollope (1815-82), Wilkie Collins (1824-89), William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63), George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans; 1819-80) and Thomas Hardy (1840-1928). Among the best novels are Collins's *The Moonstone*, Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss*, *Adam Bede* and *Middlemarch*, and Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge*, *The Return of the Native*, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* and *Jude the Obscure*.

### Modern Literature (Early 20th Century Poets):

W.B. (William Butler) Yeats (1865-1939) is one of two figures who dominate modern poetry, the other being T.S. (Thomas Stearns) Eliot (1888-1965). Yeats was Irish; Eliot was born in the USA but settled in England, and took UK citizenship in 1927. Yeats uses conventional lyric forms, but explores the connection between modern themes and classical and romantic ideas. Eliot uses elements of conventional forms, within an unconventionally structured whole in his greatest works. Where Yeats is prolific as a poet, Eliot's reputation largely rests on two long and complex works: *The Waste Land* (1922) and *Four Quartets* (1943). The work of these two has overshadowed the work of the best late Victorian, Edwardian and Georgian poets, some of whom came to prominence during the First World War. Among these are Thomas Hardy, Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), A.E. Housman (1859-1936), Edward Thomas (1878-1917), Rupert Brooke (1887-1915), Siegfried Sassoon (1886-1967), Wilfred Owen (1893-1918) and Isaac Rosenberg (1890-1918). The most celebrated modern American poet, is Robert Frost (1874-1963), who befriended Edward Thomas before the war of 1914-1918.

### Early Modern Writers:

The late Victorian and early modern periods are spanned by two novelists of foreign birth: the American Henry James (1843-1916) and the Pole Joseph Conrad (Josef Korzeniowski; 1857-1924). James relates character to issues of culture and ethics, but his style can be opaque; Conrad's narratives may resemble adventure stories in incident and setting, but his real concern is with issues of character and morality. The best of their work would include



James's *The Portrait of a Lady* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, *Nostromo* and *The Secret Agent*. Other notable writers of the early part of the century include George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950), H.G. Wells (1866-1946), and E.M. Forster (1879-1970). Shaw was an essay-writer, language scholar and critic, but is best-remembered as a playwright. Of his many plays, the best-known is *Pygmalion* (even better known today in its form as the musical *My Fair Lady*). Wells is celebrated as a popularizer of science, but his best novels explore serious social and cultural themes, *The History of Mr. Polly* being perhaps his masterpiece. Forster's novels include *Howard's End*, *A Room with a View* and *A Passage to India*.

### Joyce and Woolf:

Where these writers show continuity with the Victorian tradition of the novel, more radically modern writing is found in the novels of James Joyce (1882-1941), of Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), and of D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930). Where Joyce and Woolf challenge traditional narrative methods of viewpoint and structure, Lawrence is concerned to explore human relationships more profoundly than his predecessors, attempting to marry the insights of the new psychology with his own acute observation. Working-class characters are presented as serious and dignified; their manners and speech are not objects of ridicule. Other notable novelists include George Orwell (1903-50), Evelyn Waugh (1903-1966), Graham Greene (1904-1991) and the 1983 Nobel prize-winner, William Golding (1911-1993).

### Later 20th Century:

Between the two wars, a revival of romanticism in poetry is associated with the work of W.H. (Wystan Hugh) Auden (1907-73), Louis MacNeice (1907-63) and Cecil Day-Lewis (1904-72). Auden seems to be a major figure on the poetic landscape, but is almost too contemporary to see in perspective. The Welsh poet, Dylan Thomas (1914-53) is notable for strange effects of language, alternating from extreme simplicity to massive overstatement. Of poets who have achieved celebrity in the second half of the century, evaluation is even more difficult, but writers of note include the American Robert Lowell (1917-77), Philip Larkin (1922-1985), R.S. Thomas (1913-2000), Carol Shields novel *The Stone Diaries* won the 1995 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, and another novel, *Larry's Party*, won the Orange Prize in 1998. Doris Lessing from Southern Rhodesia, now Zimbabwe, was a dominant presence in the English literary scene, frequently publishing from 1950 on throughout the 20th century, and she won the Nobel prize for literature in 2007. *Lawrence Hill's Book of Negroes* won the 2008 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Overall Best Book Award, Munro also received the Man Booker International Prize in 2009. Alice Munro became the first Canadian to win the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2013. Salman Rushdie is another post Second World War writers from the former British colonies who permanently settled in Britain. Rushdie achieved fame with *Midnight's Children* 1981. His most controversial novel *The Satanic Verses* 1989, was





inspired in part by the life of Muhammad. V. S. Naipaul (born 1932), born in Trinidad. Recently Sir Salman Rushdie participated in Hay Festival 2016, the UK's largest annual literary festival with his update contribution in English literature.

### CONCLUSION:

Literature has a history, and this connects with cultural history more widely. Prose narratives were written in the 16th century, but the novel as we know it could not arise, in the absence of a literate public. The popular and very contemporary medium for narrative in the 16th century is the theatre. The earliest novels reflect a bourgeois view of the world because this is the world of the authors and their readers (working people are depicted, but patronizingly, not from inside knowledge). The growth of literacy in the Victorian era leads to enormous diversification in the subjects and settings of the novel. In recent times the novel has developed different genres such as the thriller, the whodunit, the pot-boiler, the western and works of science-fiction, horror and the sex-and-shopping novel. Some of these may be brief fashions (the western seems to be dying) while others such as the detective story or science-fiction have survived for well over a century. As the dominant form of narrative in contemporary western popular culture, the novel may have given way to the feature film and television drama. But it has proved surprisingly resilient. As society alters, so the novel may reflect or define this change; many works may be written, but few of them will fulfill this defining role; those which seem to do so now, may not speak to later generations in the same way.

### REFERENCES:

Birch, Dinah, ed. (27 October 2011), "modernism", The Oxford Companion to English Literature Oxford Reference Online, Oxford University Press.

Davies, Marion Wynne, ed. (1990), The Bloomsbury Guide to English Literature, New York: Prentice Hall.

Dettmar, Kevin JH (27 October 2011), "Modernism", in Kastan, David Scott, The Oxford Encyclopedia of British Literature, Oxford University Press

Drabble, Margaret, ed. (1996), The Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fulk, RD; Cain, Christopher M (2003), A History of Old English Literature, Malden: Blackwell.



Kiernan, Kevin (1996), *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, ISBN 0-472-08412-7.

Man Booker official site: J. G. Farrell; Hilary Mantel "Archived copy". Archived from the original on 13 March 2016. Retrieved 22 March 2016.;

Orchard, Andy (2003), *A Critical Companion to Beowulf*, Cambridge: DS Brewer.

Robinson, Fred C (2001), *The Cambridge Companion to Old English Literature*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 143.

*The Cambridge Companion to Irish Literature*, ed. John Wilson Foster. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Ward, AW; Waller, AR; Trent, WP; Erskine, J; Sherman, SP; Van Doren, C, eds. (1907–21), *History of English and American literature (encyclopedia in eighteen volumes)*, New York: GP Putnam's Sons University Press.